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More Protection Granted for Mountain Caribou
Judge's Ruling Shields Essential Caribou Habitat While Maintaining Access for Snowmobiles

PRIEST LAKE, Idaho – The last remaining mountain caribou in the lower 48 states received an extra layer of protection from the Eastern District Court in Washington. The court issued a February 14 ruling that will allow the endangered caribou to migrate from the northern areas to the southern areas of their habitat, while still permitting snowmobiles in much of the Priest Lake region.

“This ruling demonstrates that Idaho is big enough for both snowmobiles and mountain caribou, something we’ve believed all along,” said Mike Petersen with The Lands Council in Spokane. “Once a species goes extinct, there’s no bringing it back, so we have to protect the few caribou we have.”

A single herd of mountain caribou, recently estimated at approximately 37 animals, remain in the lower 48 states, making them the most endangered large mammal in North America. Like elk and other wildlife, caribou are most vulnerable in the winter when they are stressed by cold weather and deep snows. Snowmobiles and other recreational vehicles passing through caribou habitat have put additional strain on the herd.

“Judge Robert Whaley’s pivotal decision provides critical protection for the rare mountain caribou in northern Idaho,” said Mike Leahy with Defenders of Wildlife. “The protected area is necessary to ensure that historic caribou migration patterns, which are so essential for their survival, can continue.”

The ruling allows snowmobiling in areas along the edges of the designated recovery area and several trails within the recovery area, yet prohibits most off-trail use in the most essential caribou habitat. Approximately 90 percent of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest is outside of the recovery zone and will not be impacted.

Conservation groups originally took legal action against the Forest Service in 2005, saying the agency’s winter recreation policies threatened the endangered mountain caribou. In November 2006, the conservation groups and snowmobilers reached an agreement on which play areas and trails need to be closed off for the caribou’s protection, but the court chose not to implement the agreement, and instead moved for a trial. This ruling allows more snowmobiling access than the November agreement.

“We feel that Judge Whaley’s decision strikes an important balance between allowing access and protecting mountain caribou when they are most vulnerable,” said Jonathan Oppenheimer of Idaho Conservation League. “It provides suitable access to recreation areas while still protecting the only remaining caribou habitat in the nation.”

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